



# From MARCH 2018 (Volume 84—South America#1)







- **Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018**

Leaving home around 16.30 we got the tube wheeling our two red cases with our backpack. Our South American adventure had arrived. Because of a computer glitch with BA I had only been able to get Lynn's boarding pass confirmed on line and the seats allocated were the last available and as we had to be paid extra for this it seemed unacceptable so we had to allow airport time to sort out the seats we wanted. The BA staff were very helpful but unable to sort it out straight away. As we were about to board they somehow managed to secure two side seats together and Lynn was a 'happy bunny'. It was a long (13.5 hour) flight but the bed seats were great and after a great meal we slept beautifully. Arriving at Buenos Aires Ezeiza Airport we were greeted with such a long immigration/passport control as the line slowly snaked forward with several flights converging. As it took over an hour our greeting guide and driver had already left as they assumed we were 'no-shows'.

I made a call to the agency and they returned driving us through some shanty town outskirts before we arrived at the Intersur Recoleta Hotel situated on Callao Avenue, a tree-lined busy street in what was the embassy area of BA. The surrounding shops were smart and stylish and the apartments appeared to be fashionable. The architecture was more European than we had expected and some grand facades were evident. Our initial room on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor looked out onto a massive wall so we asked for another. This was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and overlooked the street and with the windows open it was a lot nicer.

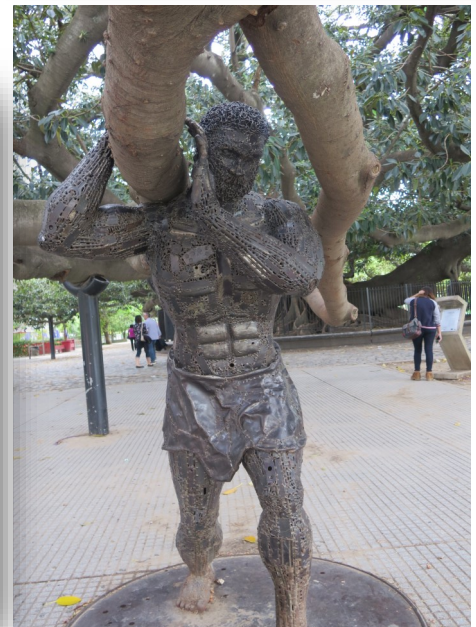


As is our way, we immediately decided to explore the locality and found an attractive pink restaurant with tables under the trees overlooking a square where people were milling around. It seemed a busy spot. It transpired that it was opposite the famous cemetery where Edith Peron was buried and was a 'must see'. Our meal there was very good and it was a great spot to sit and enjoy the area. Opposite was an enormous old tree with massive gnarled roots and it seemed like many



joined trees but was actually just one. We'd never seen one like this

We went into the cemetery which was free and then could see why it was such a well-known attraction. 5000 mausoleums were in long criss-crossed avenues and some were in total disrepair with the coffins inside on show







And others were enormous marble edifices. Each one was totally different and it seemed like a city of the dead. What made it even more fascinating were the apartments, shops and offices visible all round overshadowing the surrounding cemetery walls. After much searching we found Edith Peron's grave which was in a small



side street and dotted with flowers and messages but very low key compared to many of the others. I took so many photos around there as it was so atmospheric.



That evening we had booked a meal at a traditional Argentinian steakhouse, Le Favor for 8.00pm which is early for BA restaurants as many don't even open until 9.00pm. The ambience was great and Americans both sides of us chatted to us through the excellent meal which was enormous. I had found reviews on Trip Advisor that suggested ordering half portions which we did and our shared meal was still massive.



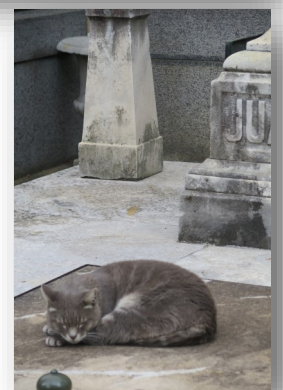


### Photo History

**La Recoleta Cemetery** is the famous cemetery located in Buenos Aires Argentina containing the graves of notable people, including Eva Peron, presidents of Argentina and many others. The BBC hailed it as one of the World's best cemeteries as did CNN



What was so fascinating was that all the mausoleums were so different, from tiny to enormous, from neglected with the coffins showing. There are over 5000 mausoleums and all around the walls the city could be seen towering over it. People walked there with kids and it was kept very tidy but many cats had made their homes there







# Photo History



Some of the fascinating mausoleums in the famous cemetery







Eva Peron's mausoleum was hidden away and many flowers had been placed on it. It was returned to Argentina after being taken to various countries







We got on so well with Jeremy and his mother Penny on the adjacent table that we agreed to meet up the following day

**Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2018**



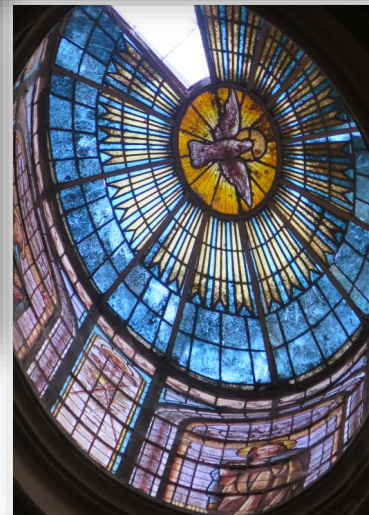
We had planned our BA exploring day and with the aid of our map we left after our buffet breakfast heading towards San Telmo quite a walk away. We really enjoyed seeing the real city and finding our way around. The massively wide streets (The world's widest) were easy to cross if the pedestrian lights were obeyed. Walking past embassies and grand hotels we crossed these boulevards and slowly the area became more artisan with small restaurants, cafes and shops and very busy everywhere. This was great fun. I even found San Telmo market in a small back street where we had coffee.



Walking through BA to San Telmo...Dog walkers had up to 10 dogs of all sizes. It was hard work and they sometimes tied the dogs to railings and drank a mate







LIBRO DE LA PLEGARIA DE SLIJOT, rescatado de la Sinagoga del ghetto de Varsovia, Polonia.



The empanadas (small fluted pastry pies) were everywhere and were a great snack

The beautiful Metropolitan cathedral had a stunning interior. In an alcove on the left were memorials to the holocaust— apparently unique in a Catholic Church.

The market was great fun and very interesting. We even got locked in the loo (luckily with others) and with a combined shout the attendant sauntered over to release us.







## Photo History



San Telmo Market and the recently renovated dock area reputed to be the most expensive real estate in Buenos Aires





## Photo History



Amazing, the strange folk one meets when traveling and even they couldn't find the way on my map





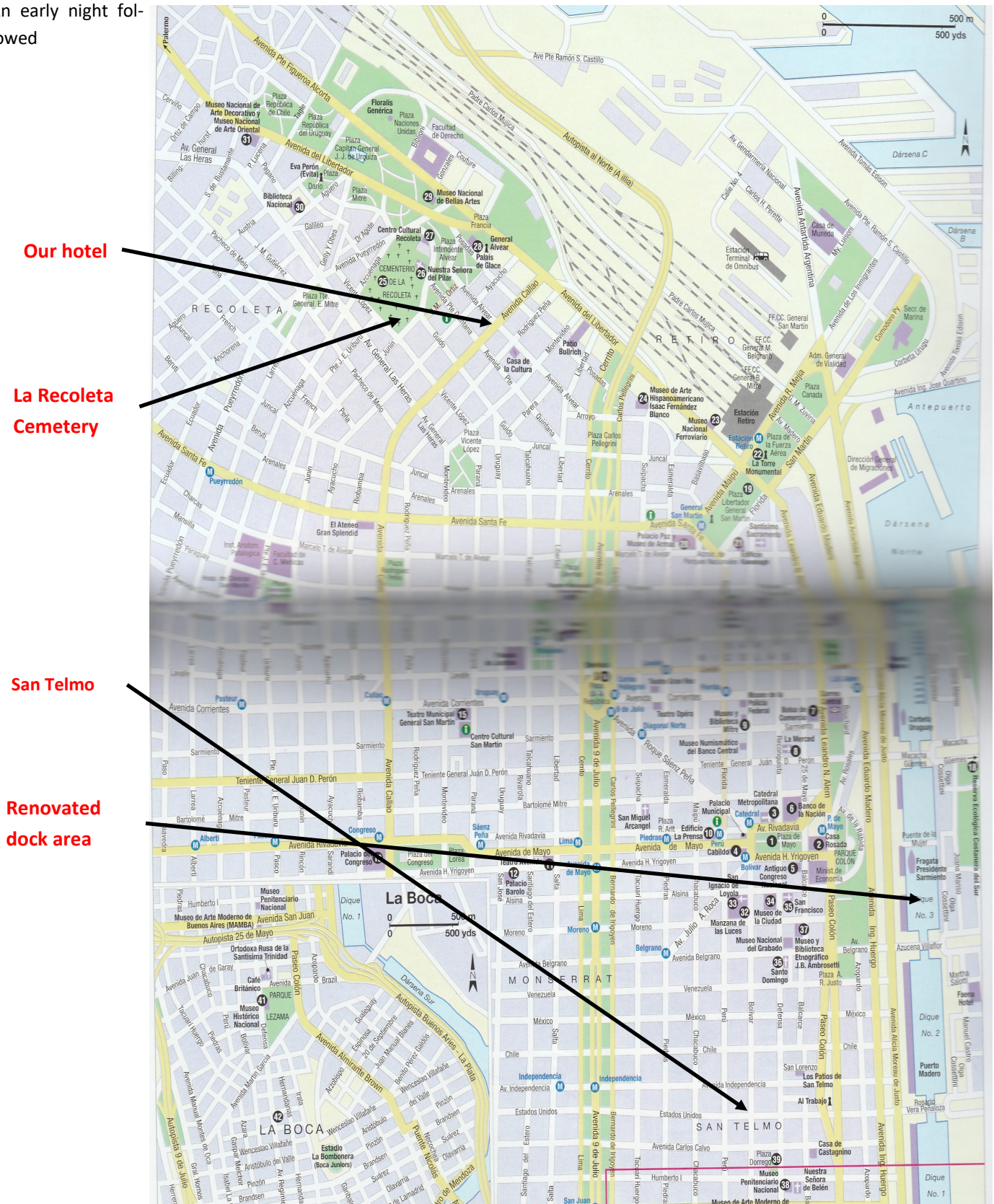


## Photo History



Walking along the recently renovated old docks we saw another side of BA which was developing and then we continued walking, pretty tired by now. When we got to a really busy junction my renowned map reading skills totally vanished and we headed off in completely the wrong direction: around building sites and along the docks, with no street names to re-orientate ourselves. It took a fair while, exhaustingly so, but eventually we found our way back onto my map-able area. We walked for over 6 ½ hours and flopped down on our beds. We went locally to get empanadas which were quite good but nothing to rave about.

An early night followed







Sat 24<sup>th</sup> March 2018

Penny and Jeremy had given us their hotel details (a few minutes walk from our hotel) and we thought we had found it pretty quickly, checking the name with the reception. They said they had recently changed the name so we waited patiently. After a while we asked where the Garden terrace was and we were informed there wasn't one...wrong hotel .....whoops! We rushed to find the right one and it was beautiful. Jeremy and Penny waved hungrily from the terrace overlooking the beautiful garden and we chatted and enjoyed a great breakfast. (see Lynn's favourite French toast below) It transpired that Jeremy had flown from Los Angeles here especially to see his favourite group; Depeche Mode, who, it transpired, were also staying in this hotel. They insisted on paying for our lavish breakfast



We then walked, assisted by my brilliant map reading to Retiro Station, intending to take the train to Tigre. Waiting patiently for the train to arrive in the beautiful station we became increasingly aware it was not going to happen. A young guy aware of our problem explained in English what the barrier girl was saying. Ongoing rail-works meant that our train was departing from Riva Davia station and he pointed out the rail replacement bus across the busy square.







## Photo History



This connected seamlessly to our crowded train and after approx. ¾ hour we arrived at Tigre. This is obviously a popular local tourist destination ..but mainly from Buenos Aires.

Tigre is on a busy river and hordes of people arrived by car and train and walked along the river buying souvenirs, drinks etc and then taking boat trips from the many landing stages where they were all competing for business. Originally we were going to book a Tigre trip from Buenos Aires but advice I gleaned from Trip Advisor alerted me to the ease of doing it alone (the challenge always appeals to me anyway).



We decided to have a coffee in the garden of an old historic house but when we saw the guests at all the garden tables enjoying meats sizzling from individual side bbq's. we succumbed and joined them. It was great but the meat was not as tender as bbq meat should be and demand-



ed considerable chewing. But it was great fun.



Then we chose a boat trip which promised smaller boats that, unlike the very large catamarans, could navigate the narrow rivers and see the many islands. It proved to be a great choice because this hidden area of island homes was fascinating. Some ramshackle and basic houses, some falling down and some luxury villas all adjacent to one another. Some were in individual jungle-like plots and some in green manicured lawned estates. They all were surrounded by rocks on the river banks vainly attempting to prevent the water erosion partly caused by the many boats passing by. The water was only around 1.5 metres deep in places and prone to flooding. It was an eye-opening trip with

the wide main river sporting a Chinese City and amusement park with a big wheel, flumes and roller coasters plus ship yards with rusting hulks half submerged and being broken up.





## Photo History



Hundreds of little islands dotted with summer houses on stilts on the Parana Delta. It is around 28 kms from Buenos Aires and the clear air attracts many locals and tourists at weekends





## Photo History



We returned and walked back to the crowded train which was enjoyable with girls singing and playing a guitar and selling filled rolls plus many train sellers speedily racing through the interconnected carriages with sweets, drinks and begging cards. They hurriedly gave these out and other family members then promptly collected them hopefully with money attached.

We again transferred to the long queues for the rail replacement buses which went incredibly smoothly and we arrived back at Le Retiro station from where we walked back to our hotel now being 'old hands' at the back streets.

It had been a long day so we had a pavement café coffee locally just before it closed for the night and we bought some ready cooked schnitzels and salad from a well stocked local supermarket counter which we enjoyed in our room looking down onto the tree-lined street below. We then flopped exhaustedly into our beds.

There was a leakage problem in our bathroom which I told reception about and they promised to fix it the following day while we were out.

### Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> March

The alarm set for 4.00am allowed us time for an abridged breakfast in the lobby prior to our cab arriving at 5.45am. As the leak had not been fixed, my complaint secured an agreed upgrade to a suite when we return (plus a meat, cheese and salad platter sent to our room with a note of apology). A long wait in Buenos Aires airport with the usual checking in, security, passport control, waiting, looking at the screen then queuing endlessly to board the plane to our allocated seats. Why are we all so sheepish??.....this part of travel becomes more annoying and actually spoils travel nowadays. Sure, I understand the need for security etc, but sometimes I wonder if this whole performance is justified by the location visited. Usually I find it is a small price to pay so I swallow my annoyance.. A great flight over snow capped mountains and we were met at Santiago airport and driven through some out-of-town slum areas and slowly the surroundings changed to leafy tree-lined streets with massively tall multi-storey buildings, a combination of offices (many multi-nationals) expensive apartments and modern hotels.



Ours was 15 stories and was one of the lower buildings. What was very evident was the attractive surroundings and modernity of our location and as we later found, the downtown city centre was a lot less attractive and desirable.

A friendly greeting at the HB Plaza El Bosque which was a modern hotel and our room with wet room was very well appointed. The staff were very pleasant and points of interest were marked on our map: The shopping malls (Lynn's eyes lit up)..downtown areas where the restaurants etc were and the local park and where the metro stops were and the buses to catch ..or would we prefer a taxi?? Silly question to ask us. We love to see the real areas and the only way is by local transport. So, we bought a BIP card which we charged with 3000 Chilean pesos and figured out how to use it to open the barrier. The





### Photo History

large-wheeled metro glided in and were very similar to most city metros. Watching intently we alighted at the City Centre and an elderly couple seemed to sense we were looking for directions pointed us on the right path. Being Sunday, most of the small shops were shuttered but we ended up in the main square and as good luck would have it (or 'bad luck' as Lynn would say) we found yet another fish market where we went into a small café with a separate kitchen across the passage and had a great fish soup piled high with clams, shrimps etc and I had a fish called Australian which was grilled and delicious. . Local families surrounded us and as we walked round afterwards loving the great traditional feel of Mercado Central







# Some sights around Santiago city centre

## Photo History







## Photo History



Walking back we looked inside the Cathedral which was beautiful and lots of people were seated in silence praying and contemplating although no service was going on. Being a Catholic area many were buying the palm leaves being threaded outside and we witnessed many kissing the various statues of the saints all around. It was a very peaceful contrast to the frantic scene in the large square outside. We had been warned to watch out for pickpockets here. The locals here were very different to Buenos Aires where over 70% of Chiles' population live. Here they appear more peasant-like and apparently they have a different heritage.

We took the bus back and it followed, on the surface, the Red Line metro we had come in on but this time we could see the areas the stations were in and some, like El Golf were really affluent. This, as the name suggests, has the golf club in the centre and has many embassy buildings and apartments, where the ambassadors live, surrounding it.

Santiago lies in a valley with mountains all round and many are permanently snow-capped. The modern buildings look fantastic in this setting. We bought some cold drinks for our room fridge from the well-stocked supermarket and I then jumped into the infinity pool on the rooftop 15<sup>th</sup> floor. I jumped out equally quickly as it was freezing. The adjacent hot pool did not attract me. I always feel these are like a slow cooking soup with people acting as stock flavourings and personally I'd sooner not share body secretions with unknown folk..but that's just my take and I know some folk swear by them. The sunset over the city was wonderful with the mountain backdrop but I forgot my camera and the following day missed that moment and got night shots which also were great.

### Monday 26<sup>th</sup> March

An early buffet breakfast as we were picked up around 8.30am for a day trip to Valparaíso and Vina de Mar on the Pacific coast. Alexhandra (Alex) then drove to another local hotel where we picked up a lovely Mexican girl called Nadia. The four of us gelled from the outset and we had animated conversations all day. We stopped off at a so-called 'wine-tasting' stop which was actually a tourist trap with cloths, souvenirs and everything we hate so we were glad to move on. From then on it was great. Climbing a steep hill we then dropped down into Vina De Mar which is adjacent to Valparaíso and looked great from above with the mountains and bay down below.



Then we entered a small square with statues and a naval building and drove above it where Alex parked and we all walked down through the cobbled streets which were a blaze of coloured small house many with corrugated exteriors which originally were stolen from Swedish ships. To complete my delight they were covered with fantastic graffiti as if to complete my day. The colours, views and atmosphere were memorable and I hope my 'steaming' camera captures some of the wonder of this magic place.



This modern glass monster was built inside this original facade





Photo History



USE THE BIKE!!!!!!







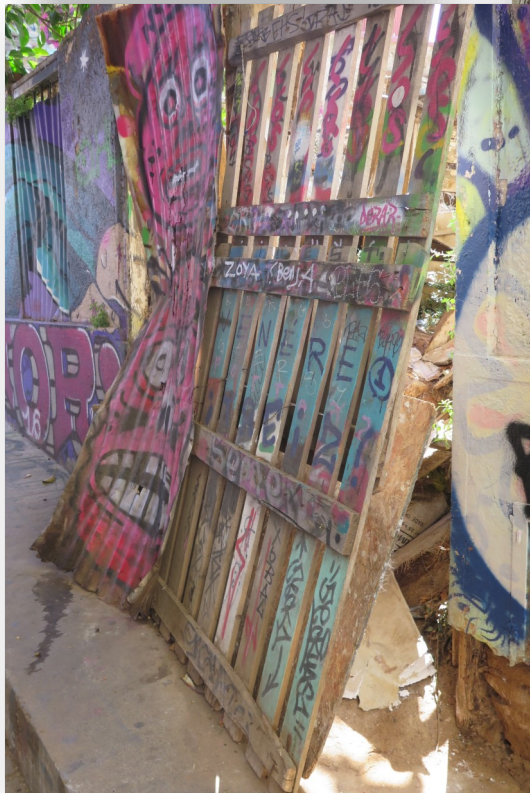
I make no apologies for the disproportionate number of Valparaiso street art shots but they were so terrific that I couldn't stop



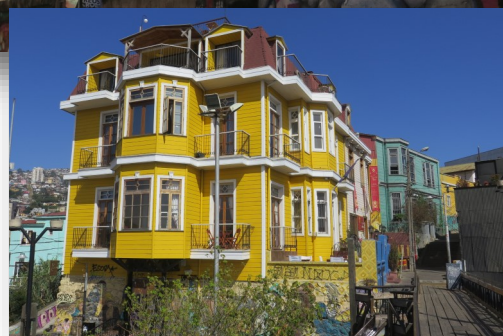
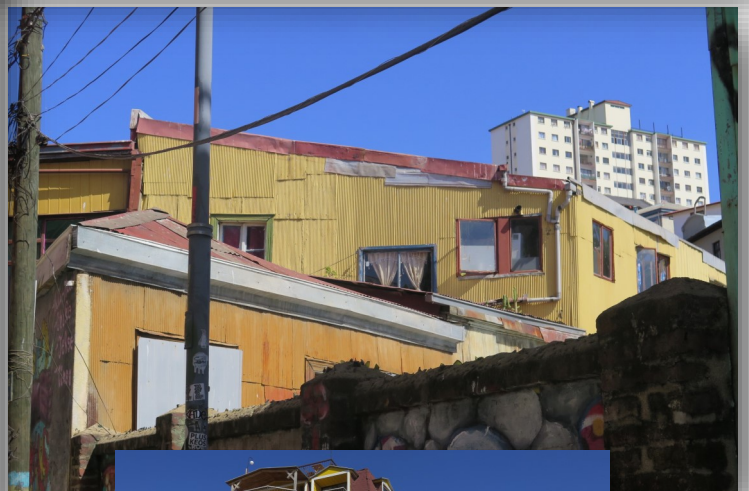
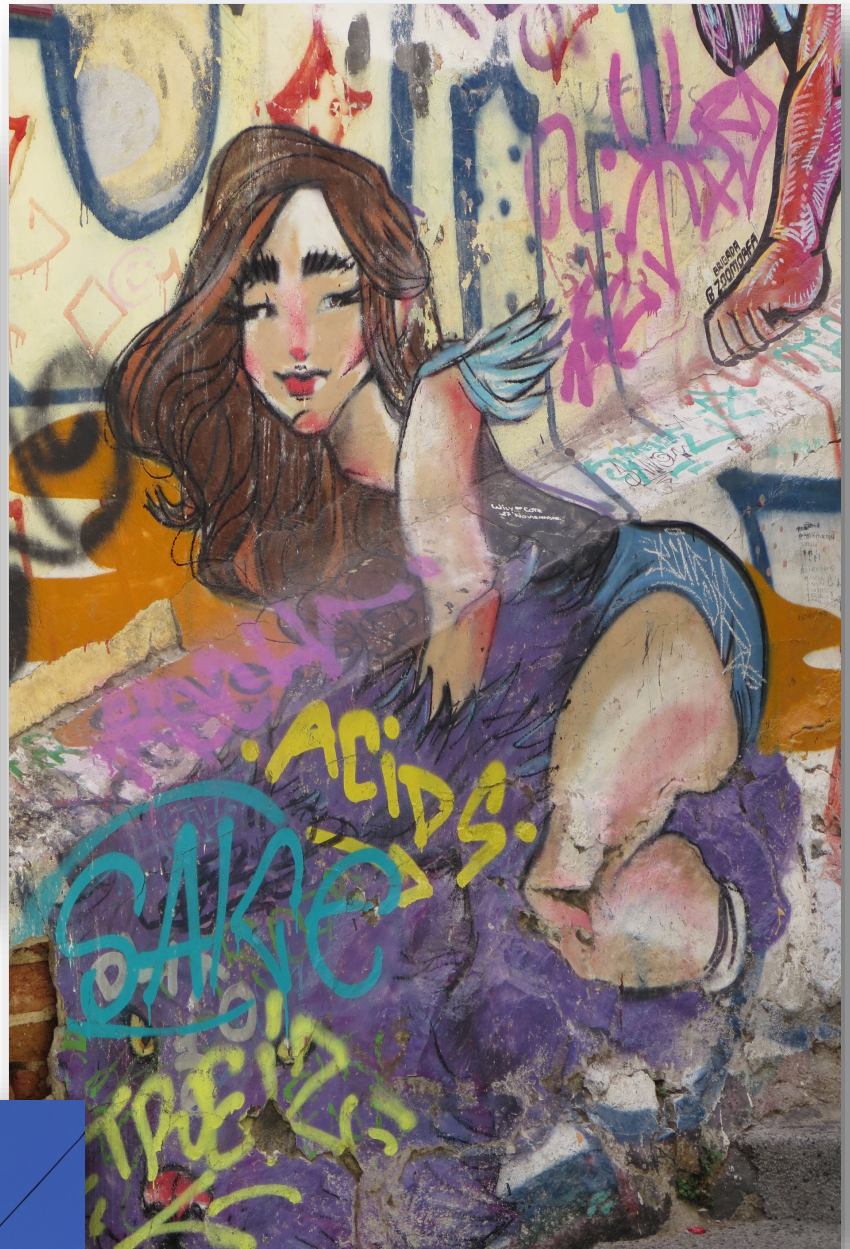




## Photo History











## Photo History



Leaving Valparaiso our guide Alejandro (Alex) had booked lunch at Il Dominito. This wonderful vineyard estate building stood proudly high above the Casablanca valley and the brilliant white futuristic building was striking against the bright blue sky.



We enjoyed a fantastic gourmet lunch, beautifully presented and served which added to this wonderful day. A very knowledgeable young lady gave us a fascinating wine talk about the Casablanca valley and this vineyard. She showed us the massive stainless steel holding tanks and the tasting/blending lab. We then walked into the beautifully-lit cellar containing oak barrels with maturing vintages







## Tuesday 27th March 2018

We decided to take the metro into Santiago but we had seen the wonderful park behind the hotel which stretched along the whole area. It was really special with a raised walkway, oscillating fountains in a square with music where we sat for a while. Watered lawns and kids play areas and skate board areas. Surrounded by tall offices, apartments and hotels it was like a really well used amenity. We visited a modern mall which had a recently opened luxury brand area (we could have been in a city in the world). What we rapidly realised is that Santiago suburbs were a lot more desirable than the downtown city centre. El Golf was one area where there were embassies and , as the name implies, the golf club had many tree-lined streets and lovely apartments.



Lynn with an outsized Gucci bag that was too large for our suit-case



We then took the metro to downtown Santiago again and had a lunch in a great restaurant with a lovely waitress who explained the intricacies of Pisco Sour to an enthralled Lynn. The food was beautifully presented and excellent







## Photo History



I gave them well deserved Trip Advisor review which they re-

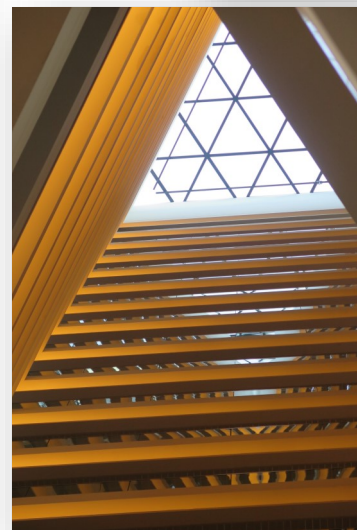
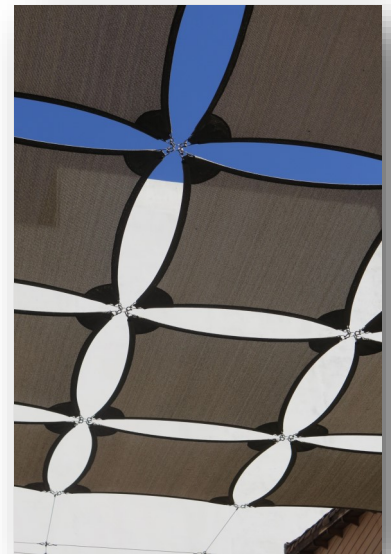


sponded to. However the short walk to MAVI, the Museum of art was a disappointment with very few art works and none we were impressed by. Our senior status gained



us free entry however.

I took some shadow/reflection shots and felt, in my unbiased opinion, that they were better than the art work inside











Outside the museum was an open courtyard and some young lads were practising their dance moves to warp music and they were so intense and wrapped up in their moves that the resulting video and pictures really captured the moment.



The Gabriela Mistral Cultural Center, known as GAM, is an expansive arts and culture space inaugurated in the heart of *Santiago* in 2010 was marginally more interesting but appeared to be in its infancy. There was a class of youngsters honing their crocheting/knitting skills but not many art works on display



We got the bus back, the route following the metro line below and our destination was called out personally by the friendly driver. After a short hotel rest we enjoyed a local iced coffee n a hotel bar terrace



astounded. It reminded me of a town in the old wild





## Photo History



### Wednesday 28th March 2018

Our morning transfer took us from our modern hotel in Santiago to a very different part of Chile. The Sky flight was just over two hours and we landed in the middle of the Atacama desert, in Calamar at around 1.30pm



Calama is a city on the Loa River in the Antofagasta region in northern Chile. Set in a mining area, it's known as a gateway to the Atacama Desert. Just north, Chuquibambilla is a vast open-pit copper mine. Southeast, Valle de la Luna, in Los Flamencos National Reserve, has a moonlike landscape of mountains and distinctive rock formations which we saw later

What was very evident was that China is taking vast quantities of copper by road and then sea. This port area was originally Paraguayan but won by Chile and now disputed. Landlocked Paraguay is now attempting to negotiate regaining valuable sea access.

Driving through the barren desert we climbed high and I noticed the first effects of altitude sickness so will have to acquire some coca leaves to make a brew.. We could see San Pedro de Atacama below in the desert; an oasis in a desolate wonderful craggy landscape. No habitation and only solar panels and many wind farms dotting the vast area all around us. Lynn compared it to a lunar landscape ideal for a Star Wars film location. The journey took around an hour and as we drove in we were totally





Aware of the great contrast. It was like a wild west film set. . All single storey small buildings and unpaved sandy, dusty roads. Busy with people wandering around the smallish area many of whom were young hippy types with backpacks and a there was a general fun atmosphere.



This, we rapidly realised, was the tour centre where everyone met and planned excursions into the wonderful surrounding area. There were loads of small interesting restaurants and agencies offering various trips. Money change shops and bike hire with small hotels and hostels behind the stone walls. We were dropped off at our hotel, Terrantai Lodge and Christian introduced himself and gave us an introductory talk which was very necessary as everything here is so totally different. Only use the bottled water and they will make up a coca brew for the altitude problems we may encounter. Take plenty of

water on the trips out to avoid dehydration and remember the sun is strong. There is a wine a cheese couple of hours in the front desk area nightly and we were shown around what Christian rightly referred to as the first local boutique hotel. Paths between local brick passages weaved between a small pool area, an area with a waterfall and also an area with small trees and seats all around. A lovely touch were the hessian bags with the hotel logo containing a beautiful useful red water flask, also with the hotel logo. This will be put to good use. The rooms were interspersed with beautiful copper emblems reflecting our gigantic room keys. The rooms were delightful with creams and light brown and beige colouring, a giant fan cooling the air and wooden tree trunks and branches forming the splendid ceilings. A wonderful modern shower washroom completed the picture and it was very tranquil with birdsong and the fountain adding to the atmosphere. There was a fresh coffee machine with biscuits and, to Lynn's delight, popcorn at the front desk together with water dispensers and also lemon-flavored water available to help oneself to. Caroline introduced herself and the staff here are really friendly. We walked round the small town which was really do-able in a very short time and it was buzzing with people some even as old as us.....amazingly enough,







Photo History



Inside the small local church

A lovely small tranquil area in the hotel where we read and relaxed



One thing we noticed were the large number of sleeping dogs everywhere and they all seemed to be the same golden colour—very few black ones.

We had a meal, a set menu with a main of fresh fish or tortillas and it was pretty good and cost 6000 pesos which is only around £7.00. Lynn was delighted when we located a girl locally who would do our washing tomorrow for a reasonable amount so we took the large bag across to her and then joined other guests for some cheese and wines. This is complimentary and a great way to meet fellow travellers and we chatted to Randy, a retired US professor who is on a conservation trip here from California and was really interesting. Loreto our local tour organiser popped in with our bus tickets ready for when we leave and was keen to tell us that she had heard what nice people we were from the hotel, the guides etc, rather flattering but we have met some really great folk already and emails are coming in from all around which seem to open up a whole world of interest with lives so different from ours.

We decided to call it a day quite early but at around 9.30pm we suddenly remembered we had started really early and done a lot in one day. Times seem to be a bit mixed up with all this travelling. It is 3.00am now and I have woken up and decided to type up this diary while it was all fresh in my mind. I find that otherwise, when you see so much, you can forget the interesting small scenarios, with local colour and flavours that these ramblings bring back when we return.



### Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> March 2018

A good relaxing night's sleep. Breakfast was very informal by the front desk. A chafer with scrambled egg and crispy bacon. Jugs of fresh orange and fresh melon juices, Home made bread with sliced cheeses and meats. I made up two coca flasks for our trip later in the hope that it will help with possible altitude sickness.

Lynn and I decided to see around the town so walked out of town crossing a dried up river bed into the hills and we could see the volcanos in the distance and craggy sand all around and as we climbed we could see San Pedro de Atacama standing out as a green oasis in the middle. Walking back into town we saw many hostels which were obviously here before the hotels.





### Photo History



San Pedro de Atacama has obviously developed over the years due to its position in the centre of such amazing sights. It is a tourist hub but is so totally different from anywhere we have ever been to: in the middle of the desert with dusty unmade roads, sleeping dogs, single storey traditional adobes and busy with (mainly young) tourists. With the incredibly clear air it is also the centre of world alliances in astronomical discovery with dishes at over 5000 meters which demand oxygen for the scientists to be able to work at that altitude



We enjoyed coffee and a rest in our hidden-away garden before lunch

We had lunch in a small casual restaurant in a side-street locally and strangely enough it was an Italian-style menu with pastas and pizzas but I caught them overcharging on a drink and that always saddens me.

Our tour guide and driver came right on time, picking up another young lady on route. We drove about 12 miles into the salt mountain range. This is between the Andes and the Domeyko ranges. We walked through Death Valley with its strange rock formations. The scenery with masses of salt areas looked like lakes from the distance. With the beautiful blue sky and the two mountain ranges in the distance the clear air made it a very hauntingly beautiful place. As we climbed higher, from 2000 to 4000 metres I suffered with altitude sickness again and despite drinking coca brew I felt lightheaded and very lethargic and I slept in the mini bus for long periods. It is a very debilitating sickness. We looked at a rock formation known as The Three Mary's and then drove off road



to a high view point to watch the wonderful sunset which was followed by some juice and canapes set out by our vehicle. We met some great folks from the UK up here and got on very well with them, exchanging emails etc

I was glad to get back despite the magnificent scenery we had enjoyed

**Friday 30<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

We left at 8.00am in the morning, again picking up Tamara (the young Spanish girl) on route and as

we climbed, the sickness hit me again and unfortunately I wasn't Mr Smiley. However the fantastic surroundings did their best to lift my spirits.





We drove towards the Atacama Salt flats, the largest in Chile and crossed The Tropic of Capricorn cutting through a totally empty desert area. We stopped briefly at Socaire which is a succession of cultivated terraces with a new community hydroponic greenhouse. Almost deserted here, a very isolated place to live, and the town dates from pre-Columbian times with the small attractive simple church.





## Photo History



Driving around 115 kms from San Pedro De Atacama we came to the Lagoon region (The Minique and Miscanti lagoons) which are protected so as not to disturb the flamingos and other roosting birds there. The water is very salty and the flamingos constantly agitate the sand below the shallow water to disturb the small shrimp which makes up most of their diet. I managed to capture a shot of a flamingo flying down close to us.

The blue waters surrounded by the snow-covered volcanoes was spectacular. This is over 4000 metres and the



alti-  
tude  
really  
affect-

ed me. Luckily Lynn was fine.

The oasis of Toconao was our next stop where lunch for the three of us (plus guide and driver) had been arranged. This is a really tiny isolated place..not even really definable as a town.. Our big soups and fried fish with salad was enormous (as always). We wandered around the tiny deserted square and bought some presents for neighbours and friends made out of cactus wood which neither of us had seen before. This had a sort of ceramic look.

As I still felt a bit grim I rested and slept for long periods ..hopefully to feel fit and well the next day







Marie and Dave Atkinson,  
a lovely couple we met at  
this stunning sunset

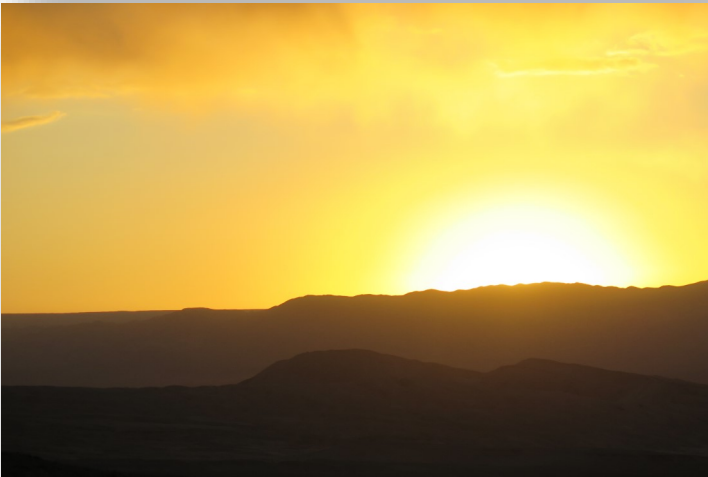






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We enjoyed coffee and a rest in our hidden-away garden before lunch

We had lunch in a small casual restaurant in a side-street locally and strangely enough it was an Italian-style menu with pastas and pizzas but I caught them overcharging on a drink and that always saddens me.

Our tour guide and driver came right on time, picking up another young lady on route. We drove about 12 miles into the salt mountain range. This is between the Andes and the Domeyko ranges. We walked through Death Valley with its strange rock formations. The scenery with masses of salt areas looked like lakes from the distance. With the beautiful blue sky and the two mountain ranges in the distance the clear air made it a very hauntingly beautiful place. As we climbed higher, from 2000 to 4000 metres I suffered with altitude sickness again and despite drinking coca brew I felt lightheaded and very lethargic and I slept in the mini bus for long periods. It is a very debilitating sickness. We looked at a rock formation known as The Three Mary's and then drove off road to a high view point to watch the wonderful sunset which was followed by some juice and canapes set out by our vehicle. We met some great folks from the UK up here and got on very well with them, exchanging emails etc

I was glad to get back despite the magnificent scenery we had enjoyed





**Friday 30<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

We left at 8.00am in the morning, again picking up Tamara (the young Spanish girl) on route and as we climbed, the sickness hit me again and unfortunately I wasn't Mr Smiley. However the fantastic surroundings did their best to lift my spirits.



We drove towards the Atacama Salt flats, the largest in



Chile and crossed The Tropic of Capricorn cutting through a totally empty desert area. We stopped briefly at Socaire which is a succession of cultivated terraces with a new community hydroponic greenhouse. Almost deserted here, a very isolated place to live, and the town dates from pre-Columbian times with the



small attractive simple church.



Driving around 115 kms from San Pedro De Atacama we came to the Lagoon region (The Minique and Miscanti lagoons) which are protected so as not to disturb the flamingos and other roosting birds there. The water is very salty and the flamingos constantly agitate the sand below the shallow water to disturb the small shrimp which makes up most of their diet. I managed to capture a shot of a flamingo flying down close to us.

The blue waters surrounded by the snow-covered volcanoes was spectacular. This is over 4000 metres and the altitude really affected me. Luckily Lynn was fine.





## Photo History



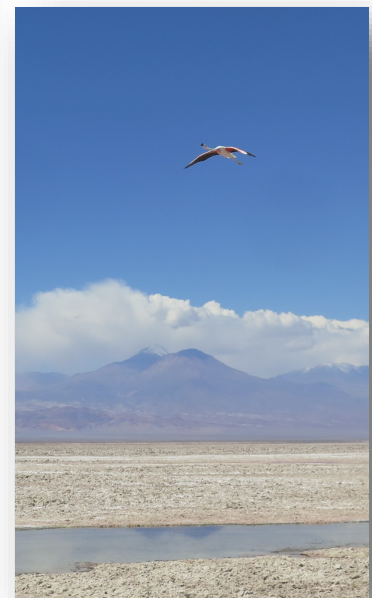
The oasis of Toconao was our next stop where lunch for the three of us (plus guide and driver) had been arranged. This is a really tiny isolated place..not even really definable as a town.. Our big soups and fried fish with salad was enormous (as always). We wandered around the tiny deserted square and bought some presents for neighbours and friends made out of cactus wood which neither of us had seen before. This had a sort of ceramic look.



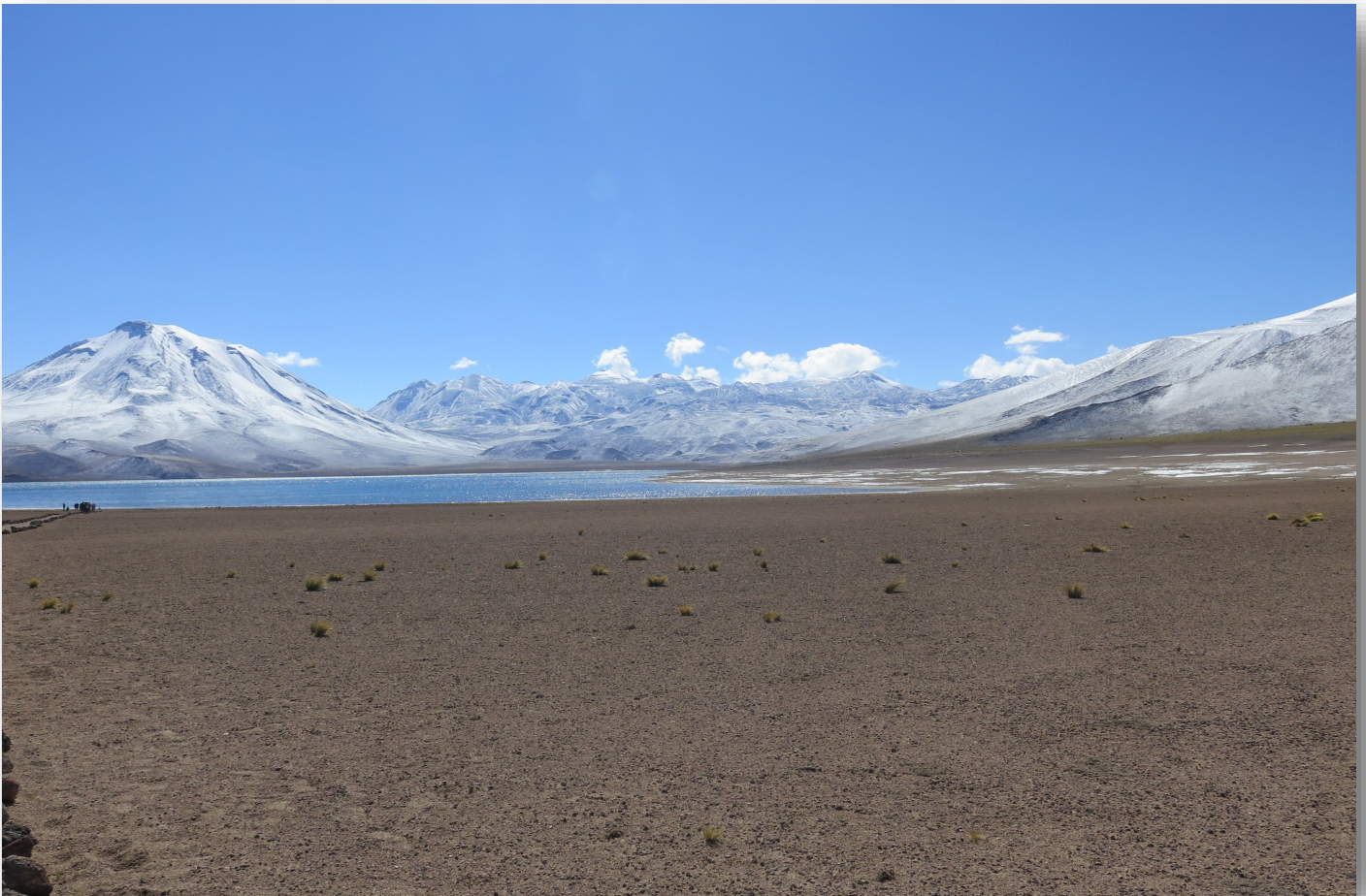
Cactus Wood: Craftsmen use it to make attractive local crafts



Flamingo in flight











## Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018

As I still felt a bit grim I rested and slept for long periods ..hopefully to feel fit and well the next day



After a minimal breakfast we were picked up at the unearthly hour of 5.00am in order to get to Geyser del Tatio for sunrise..



The drive was 95 kms from San Pedro so as soon as we left, the lights were switched off and right on cue most of us fell







asleep (Lynn somehow remained awake though) When we arrived at Tatio Geysers we were totally mesmerised by the whole spectacle around us.



Nothing can prepare one for being in the middle of such a large display of the untamed force of nature. Lots and lots of mini buses and tour coaches all making this early start and after we had a breakfast of toasted buns, juice and fresh coffee we were ready for the walk between the bubbling geysers. I had made myself a brew of coca leaves and felt a bit better and as we were over 4300 metres high....it must have worked. All around us were steaming geysers some gurgling noisily and some spouting regularly as if to allow me to capture them on my camera.

The whole area was covered by this wonderful sight and we could walk, in what appeared to be dangerously close, proximity to the volcanic activity. The paths were designated by red-painted stones and slowly the sun rose over the surrounding mountains affording me some great shots of the steam with the sun behind them. It was a totally unique spot and Lynn also couldn't take it all in. Actually, the presence of people silhouetted against the steam added to the surreal effect. To cap it all we walked a little way from this unearthly activity and there was a hot spring fed from below ground forming a pool filled with people enjoying the hot water which was such a contrast as the surrounding temperature was -6.



Caroline, the receptionist at the hotel, had lent Lynn a jacket and scarf (together with a delightful note) which made the low temperature bearable for Lynn.













Our next stop, in the middle of the desert, was at a small collection of houses called Machuca, which used to be a trading post but gradually the population

declined and now stood at only 15 people.

However, enterprise had reared its head and a couple of locals were barbequing delicious llama kebabs and the queues were enormous—all on home-made bbq's. As this was so far from anywhere it seemed so very strange to see all this activity and people queuing.







We had seen lots of wild (and some owned) llamas along the drives. Vicuna were very gentle, curious and serene and we saw some interesting large grey/grey rodents, Alpaca and Rias are also wild in the desert here. Resting with fresh coffee and popcorn in our secret garden we felt totally relaxed. I had read in Trip Advisor "not to miss this secret garden as it was so tranquil". Again, I am glad to have done some research..it always seem to pay off



Around 2.00 we decided to go and get a snack followed by the famous local ice cream. Tomorrow, we are leaving here by bus in the morning and it should take around 9 ½ hours.

### Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018

We got picked up early and the three minute journey to the bus station seemed hardly worth it. (although in reality, we could not have found it especially dragging our cases) We sorted out which bus was ours with the help of a Spanish-speaking young French traveller who was travelling the world for a year with his girlfriend.

We stowed our cases in the bus luggage area and we were delighted to see our front reclining seats were in an air



conditioned small area with a small tv and tables etc. We were given a small snack pack with a drink and biscuit.

Slowly we climbed closer to the Andes and the surrounding desert was totally barren and we seemed (judging by the slow bus speed) to be climbing the whole time.

We came to the Chile/Argentina border, a desolate small collections in the middle of no-where. As we all descended from the coach no-one seemed to know where to go. This outpost border is really isolated. Eventually with our backpack and bag we queued and had our passports stamped for the Chilean departure and we handed in the special entry visa which extremely luckily we had kept in our passports without realising their importance. The air was clear and thin and it was very sunny but chilly







## Photo History



and every step proved quite exhausting as we were at over 4200 meters. We then drove round the building and had to disembark again, this time taking our cases which had been unloaded onto the sand. We formed a queue again and this time our bags etc went through the x-ray and we went through the arch. It felt like a token search as we were not asked to remove watches and phones etc.

This time it seemed to be more problematic getting the cases back in as our final destination determined where they were placed and Pumamarca, where we were headed was not the end of the long distance route so we made sure our bags were placed into the bus storage hold after the Salta bags.

Eventually we boarded again and the road wound through a barren landscape with the occasional donkey and packs of llamas wandering around totally oblivious to the sparse traffic. Our area of the bus held 12 seats with 8 being reclining. A film was studiously ignored by everyone being a Japanese film subtitled in Spanish about a guy getting trapped in his car in a tunnel collapse. My sympathy for him rapidly diminished when he discovered a bottle of water and drank it in one go.

We got excited by the llamas with young ones in the packs and cactus were now visible for the first time. This road across the Andes now climbed steeply, surrounded by barren hills and as we continued upwards the hairpin bends were so tight the double decker coach had to stop before turning back on itself. Lynn was far from happy with the sheer drops all around us.

We had been travelling for approx. 10 hours - over 400 kms across the Andes without passing a single town, habitation or people anywhere other than



at an enormous basin surrounded by mountains that initially appeared to be a lagoon and subsequently we discovered it was actually a gigantic salt flat and people had driven here to stand on it as it was unique.

We descended into a valley and trees appeared and we were surrounded by mountains of many different colours that were spectacular as the setting sun lit them up. This oasis was our stop..Pumamarca and the driver shouted out the name and an Indian couple and a German couple got off with us. However we had been told that our hotel





## Photo History



was virtually opposite our drop off.

It wasn't.!

In the dusty road laden with backpack and cases we asked a couple of police where the hotel was and they pointed out a road that went further than we

were prepared to drag the cases etc. A taxi was available in the town centre—the opposite way so we trundled there but the taxis made a virtue of disguising themselves. Lynn managed to make someone understand and it transpired that we were right next to one. The negotiated fare seemed reasonable for the three minute trip and he even gave back half of what I proffered. The hotel more than compensated for this unfortunate episode, which actually left us laughing. It was in a tranquil small area surrounded by these magnificent coloured hills all around which were renowned for their beauty. Cactus and flower-lined gardens with a small stream running through looked magnificent and comprised small individual bungalows and a 11 room



hotel decorated beautifully and with wonderful sympathetically-chosen architecture. We were shown to our delightful room and gasped at the view from our balcony. Peaceful, apart from the squawking parakeets and we virtually dumped everything in order to walk back to town to explore.

Purmamarca exists because of its position in this wonderful spot and we witnessed colour changes all around as darkness rapidly fell. We wondered why all the stalls in the picturesque square were closing and as darkness fell we realised that they would be unable to display the bright colours of the ponchos, jewellery and clothing effectively in the dark. We wandered around ....which was a extremely short event as it is really a tiny town with its requisite white church and attractive square.

No currency change places anywhere and the card refusal in one of the busy local restaurants encouraged us to walk back uphill the ten minutes to our hotel, The illuminated gardens and ambience delighted us so we went into





the restaurant where we were joined by our new German acquaintances and had a meal of llama and pasta for Lynn



and enjoyed a great end to the day

### Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2018

We had set the alarm for 6.15am and we packed and had an early breakfast intent on walking back down to Purmamarca to witness sunrise on the beautiful hills and mountains all around. We weren't the first. We saw quite a few folk high up watching and presumably photographing the beauty. Ironically it looks better from a distance and the figures and small town added to the scene. We managed to make a local understand that we wanted to change our dollars for Argentinian pesos from a massive wad. That was around £3.50 in usable currency left and dollars and cards here.. We met our German friends again and exchanged a few way back to the hotel we checked the room and sat on the balcony. Luckily we were organised because the minibus arrived ahead of us. Four plus six of us proceeded on an all day tour of a delightful gorge with some spectacular colours and fissures. We stopped at Tilcara which was a re-fertile valley.



One of the coloured rock formations was called the skirt of the Colla woman.

We learnt a lot about the pre Incas, Spanish invasion and Quecha tribes in the area which was fascinating. We visited several small poor villages with dusty streets







and local colourful crafts being sold. Crossing the tropic of Capricorn again and lunching at a local restaurant enlivened by a small local group with pipes.



Llama was the main meat dish and Lynn opted for Llama schnitzel.

The day was probably not one of the best and we arrived at Salta quite tired being stuck in the heavy rain on a congested motorway for a time...but I guess all trips can have a down-day like that. Added to this, the room was a good size but bad neglected: scratches, stains on surfaces, no room info anywhere such as meal times, safety procedures, tv guides. A minibar was just a mini fridge with 2 mineral water and a sign displaying their cost. Not inspiring to say the least. With night descending and having run out of cash we were informed that the currency exchange closed in 5 minutes and this was the only one around. We found a really attractive busy square with an illuminated cathedral, that was splendid inside and lots of shops still open around the park in the centre. There seemed to be a lot of beggars everywhere and we figured that with very little around this busy town it must be like a magnet for less well off and the nearest town we saw; Salvadore was horrible. We managed to withdraw some cash with a debit card and the charge was the same as the amount we withdrew. We bought the kids some small gifts at a colourful cute shop...bet they'll hate them as always.







Salta, town centre



The watchful llama

Continued in Volume 85